

“Age of Innovation” Panel Discussion
Ashoka U Convening
Dr. Martha J. Kanter, Under Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
The Newseum, Washington, DC
Thursday, July 26, 2012

Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts with you this afternoon and to join such distinguished colleagues. You asked us to talk about how we prepare for society in an era where innovation is the key driver for social change. As I thought about this question, and looked back on America’s history, innovation has driven our society for decades, but it’s my view that we’re in an age where innovative ideas, products and markets are accelerating and proliferating to the point of oftentimes obscuring the outcomes we want for society at the expense of our attraction to the newest, latest and greatest. So it’s with a cautionary note that I share these remarks with you as we become the social entrepreneurs for our new century.

At no time has education mattered more to the strength of our nation, the vitality of our democracy, the prosperity of our country, and the capacity of diverse communities and individual Americans to succeed. Our challenge – and it continues as among the greatest - if not **the** greatest challenge of our time - is to provide every American – children, youth, and adults – with a world-class education. Social stratification continues to this day and the past 5 decades have produced a society where 47% of adult Americans cannot read or write at a high school level of competency. Further, an estimated one-third of our nation’s children are not prepared for kindergarten and we lose a quarter of high school students on the pathway to graduation, postsecondary education and the workforce. What’s more, 40% of first-time, full-time college students don’t complete their degrees in six years.

A month ago on June 22nd, we marked the 40th anniversary of the Pell grant program. But we are faced with troubling trends. As renowned journalist Tom Edsall noted the opinion piece he wrote for the New York Times in March entitled *The Reproduction of Privilege*: “Instead of serving as a springboard to social mobility as it did for the first decades after World War II, college education today is reinforcing class stratification, with a huge majority of the 24 percent of Americans aged 25 to 29 currently holding a bachelor’s degree coming from families with earnings above the median income. Seventy-four percent of those now attending colleges that are classified as “most competitive,” a group that includes schools like Harvard, Emory, Stanford and Notre Dame, come from families with earnings in the top income quartile, while only three percent come from families in the bottom quartile.”

Our data shows that educational preparation leads to good jobs, productive civic contributions, better health and increased personal and societal prosperity. A great education prepares Americans to participate and thrive in today’s increasingly interconnected world, as part of the global economy, in this digital age. It’s also the pathway to strengthening the social, economic and moral fabric of our increasingly diverse society ... and perpetuate the democratic values we treasure – “life, liberty and

the pursuit of happiness,” to name but a few of the core values that have enabled our country to grow and prosper.

President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and all of us in this administration believe that education is a civic, social and moral imperative, as well as an economic one. This is why Secretary Duncan calls education “the civil rights issue of our time” and that is why our mission is to educate the top 100% of students with a world-class education, not just the elite few.

To do this, we believe that civic learning and a new vision of social efficacy must become the staples of every American's education. In too many schools and on too many college campuses, courses and programs of study about the essence of a democracy and the importance of civic learning are peripheral to the core academic mission.

Too many elementary and secondary schools are pushing civics and service-learning to the sidelines, mistakenly treating education for citizenship as a distraction from preparing students for college-level mathematics, English, Science, and other core subjects, rather than infusing civic learning into every subject that is taught.

This shunting to the sidelines of civic education, service learning, public dialogue and debate, political participation and community service is counterproductive. Preparing all students for informed, engaged participation in the civic life of our communities is not just essential, it is entirely consistent with the goals of increasing student achievement, closing achievement gaps and preparing citizens to understand their role and responsibility in our democracy.

Perhaps Dr. Harry Boyte expresses it best in his recent Change Magazine essay entitled: Perspectives: A Challenging Patriotism, in which he says: “In a time of alarm about the poisoning of electoral politics, public passions inflamed by sophisticated techniques of mass polarization, and fears that the country is losing control of its collective future, higher education is called upon to take leadership in “reinventing citizenship.” It needs to respond to that call on a scale unprecedented in its history. ...in an era of globalization, there is new urgency for citizens to learn the skills and identity of empowered citizenship in their own societies, linked to the democratic aspirations and struggles of others around the world. The challenging patriotism from past movements that sought the deepening of democracy in America has renewed relevance in 21st-century America.”

A strong focus on civic learning is consistent with preparing students for 21st century careers. And it is consistent with President Obama's goal to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

- We know from research that K-12 students who participate in civic engagement activities have higher grade-point averages, higher retention rates and are more likely to enroll in and complete college.
- In addition, those students demonstrate improved academic content knowledge, critical thinking skills, written and verbal communication skills, and leadership abilities.

- These outcomes are even more profound for traditionally underrepresented students, including low-income and minority students.

As Tony Wagner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education says, there is a "happy convergence between the skills most needed in the global knowledge economy and those most needed to keep our democracy safe and vibrant." So can we converge social entrepreneurship and civic learning? That is a question I hope you'll consider.

The U.S. Department of Education has taken to heart this idea that civic learning must be integral to the education spectrum.

On January 10th, the White House hosted its first convening on civic learning, where our Department released its "Civic Learning Road Map and Call to Action." This road map outlines the nine actions we have committed to implement to support civic learning across the nation.

For example, the Federal Work-Study program currently mandates that institutions of higher education use at least seven percent of the total amount of funds awarded to provide community service jobs for students. In the 2009-10 award year, \$222 million dollars funded public service internships and work experience in government, schools and non-profit agencies. And that sum doesn't include a much larger pot of non-federal matching funds. President Obama has proposed doubling this fund in next year's budget.

To cite another example, the White Initiative that houses our Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships is working with the Corporation for National and Community Service to oversee the President's Second Annual Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge.

Several hundred colleges and universities have signed onto the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. To date, dozens of colleges and universities have committed to a year of interfaith and community service programming on their campuses.

College students participating in the Challenge select one service priority for their interfaith initiative, in areas such as poverty and education, health services, and support programs for veterans and military families.

To further enhance civic learning and engagement, we will convene, catalyze, and recognize K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions that are committed to high-quality civic learning. We want to encourage states, schools and postsecondary institutions to conduct civic audits and publish their plans and outcomes for educating students for informed engagement in civic life.

We are already working with schools, institutions and communities to identify additional civic indicators to track our progress.

We have also put out a Request for Information to highlight promising practices and to encourage further research to learn what works. And we are doing all we can to leverage federal investments and public-private partnerships in this regard.

Further, we are taking bold steps to encourage public service careers, especially to help in the outreach, recruitment, and hiring of more than 1.6 million highly effective teachers that our nation will need over the next decade. And we will continue to support

civic learning as part of a well-rounded K-12 curriculum in the proposed Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

One innovation we're especially proud of is Public Service Loan Forgiveness that will now enable millions of college graduates who enter public service careers to have their federal loans forgiven after 10 years, paying no more than 10% of their discretionary income on a monthly basis.

What's more, when we took office three years ago, 6 million low-income students who qualified for the Pell grant to help pay for their education enrolled in our postsecondary institutions. Today, 9.6 million Pell-eligible students are enrolled in higher education, a 50% increase in 3 years, and a 100% increase in students from families with incomes of \$10,000 or less per year.

President Obama and Secretary Duncan also put in place a Race to the Top for States to dramatically improve K-12 standards, teacher quality, data systems and the outcomes of the lowest performing schools in our nation. These states are leading the way to show our nation that it will be possible to give a world-class education to the growing number of children and youth across our country. And we're now replicating Race to the Top for Early Learning to improve kindergarten readiness and for school districts in addition to states.

As Ashoka leaders, I ask you to challenge us with how we can be most helpful. And, while we are passionate and committed, we are absolutely clear that we cannot do this work alone. To succeed, this great effort to leverage innovation and social entrepreneurship to advance civic learning and engagement for democracy's future needs visionary leaders locally, nationally and globally.

President Obama recently made a powerful statement about America. He said, "This nation is great because we built it together. This nation is great because we worked as a team. [...] As long as we are joined in common purpose, as long as we maintain our common resolve, our journey moves forward, and our future is hopeful, and the state of our Union will always be strong."

It's clear to me that in this effort, we are joined by a common purpose. Together, all of us as social entrepreneurs must innovate for the betterment of society, but we are equally responsible to evaluate our innovations, to determine and document what works best for our students and our communities here and across the globe, and then to replicate and scale what works, to sustain our momentum and progress going forward. Doing this well will distinguish our nation in the 21st century. Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you.